Neither Peasant nor Farmer: Transformations of Agriculture in Serbia after 2000

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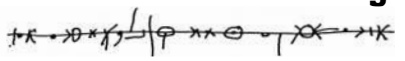

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to point to the current problems of Serbian peasantry. Even though the title indicates that the paper deals predominantly with identity issues of Serbian peasants, yet it rather depicts and explains a deeper, complex and layered process that has been influencing their identity vagueness. It reveals the historical, political and social background of the process through the entire 20th century and their repercussions on peasant identity. Special attention, though, is devoted to the period after 2000, when Serbian agriculture was promised new paths of professional development within the new democratic governments. Questioning and re-examination of officially-proclaimed professionalization of agriculture and its progress make, therefore, the main focus of this paper.

KEYWORDS

Peasant, farmer, transformations, Serbia, Vojvodina, Gaj

Serbian villages have remained beyond broader anthropological interests in the second half of the 20th century. During the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s, there was partially increased interest of foreign anthropologists in this region. A few social anthropologists - mostly from the United States of America - Joel M. Halpern, Eugene A. Hammel and Christopher C. Gaffney conducted a fieldwork research in Yugoslavia and among other fellow countries in Serbia. Halpern (1963, 1972) mostly published articles on peasantry and a monograph about a Serbian village in Šumadija (central Serbia). Gaffney (1979) published an article on a former German village in the Bačka region (Vojvodina province). Hammel (1969 a, b, c,) wrote several articles on kinship and traditional family relationships in urban and rural areas. After this period, almost total anthropological silence had arisen which lasted until the 1990s when Serbia again became the "topic" due to the civil war and dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, the village remained neglected because of the primacy of studies of nationalism and the investigation of the social and political consequences of the war.

However, as Dorondel and Şerban notice in the introduction to this volume, the general problem not only with Serbian, but also with South-Eastern European peasantry, is that its social and political history is widely neglected by peasant studies, despite the fact that it still does make a significant percentage of population in these countries. Even the attempts of the communist regime' to modernize the countryside in this area, mainly through collectivization, expropriation and forced industrialization, have not lead to the disappearance of the peasantry from any of these countries' (Dorondel and Şerban, 3). Many factors might be in play: economic – permanent national or recent global economic crises which were induced by unstable and corrupt governments; political factors – wars, civil rebellions, authoritarian governments; institutional ones

– underdeveloped institutions of democracy and the rule of the law. Yet all of them did have tremendous impact on current demographic trends in rural areas (see Bryceson et al. 2000; Spoor 2012; 2009, 26-28).

In Serbia, for instance, rural dwellers make 43,6%, while in Vojvodina province - which will be of special concern here - they make 43,33% of the overall population (RS Ministarstvo poljoprivrede 2009, 8). This paper, therefore, represents an attempt to gain a closer insight into the current state of the Serbian countryside and its population, and to emphasize the main trajectories of the latest rural transformation and development.

The paper has two tasks. The first is to highlight and summarize the main aspects of agrarian reforms in 20th century-Serbia, since there are limited national and international anthropological sources on this topic. The second task is to present the general transformation of Serbian agriculture after 2000. Within the second task, special attention will be devoted to problematizing the imperatives of progress and modernization that have been imposed by state agricultural politics and strategy after 2000.

The main argument of this paper is fairly simple. Due to the lack of political and economic continuity since the first agrarian reform in 1919, Serbian agricultural development has been first and foremost a political (ideological) project than the aim in and of itself. Due to this fact, agricultural producers[1] mostly suffer from professional and identity disorientation, which has been blatantly obvious since 2000. I argue that this has had an effect on the perception of semi-independency among village populations. More importantly, this has influenced the emergence of paired paradoxical and very complex relationships between the state and agricultural producers. The first represents the relationship between the 'patronising' state and the 'demanding' agricultural producers. The second presents the relationship of the 'neglectful' state and the 'uncontrolled' agricultural producers.

The first section of the paper is devoted to the historical overview of the main aspects of the agrarian reforms conducted in the 20th century. The second section presents an introduction into local setting of Gaj village in the South-Eastern Banat region in Vojvodina province, where fieldwork research has been conducted. The village of Gaj is taken as an example of a relatively prosperous Serbian village where all controversy of the latest agricultural transformation is obvious and deeply rooted in society[2]. The first part of the third section is devoted to the theoretical overview of the notion of "peasantry" from the perspective of the urban-rural continuum. This sheds light on the whole complexity of the notion of peasantry and its burden. Since one of the transition aims of Serbian society from 2000 onwards was modernization and transformation of peasants into farmers with the support of the state, this section in the second part also discusses why the process itself is highly superficial and contradictory. The last section tries to demonstrate how cooperation, i.e. 'partnership', between agricultural producers and the state functions on a daily basis. A few clustered examples of everyday strategies of people from Gaj aim to give more insight into the nature of this cooperation, i.e. 'partnership', which is based - as I will argue further - on manipulative strategies from both sides. These examples are also chosen to bring closer the complex relationship between the 'patronising' state and the 'demanding' agricultural producers, and the 'neglectful' state and the 'uncontrolled' agricultural producers. Finally, the paper tries to contribute to a better understanding of very vague professional and identity designation of agricultural producers, bearing in mind their constant juggling with the state on one side, and their identity on the other.

A look back: Agrarian Reforms and Politics in 20th Century-Serbia

The agrarian question in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918-1941)

1) I am using agricultural producer as value-neutral term, and as a 'third way' between the terms "peasant" and "farmer", which have strong symbolic connotations.

2) This paper partly reflects the topic of my ongoing Ph.D. research that analyses the impact of official agricultural policy on everyday life, as well as discrepancies between the official policy of rural development and its actual accomplishments since 2001. The fieldwork in Gaj lasted from February until September 2013 and was based on extensive participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

and, later on, in Socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1991), was one of the most important issues that was sometimes acquiring even 'sacred' character (Milošević 2008). As every reform, these were also ideologically-inspired and driven within two completely different political contexts. The First Agrarian Reform was conducted in the interwar period from 1919 to 1941. The Second Agrarian Reform was conducted from 1945 to 1953, but it was officially in force until the adoption of the 1991 Republic Law that marked the end of existing regulation in agriculture imposed by the state, and enforced restitution of agricultural land.

The First Agrarian Reform aimed to solve the problem of landless people who made 38,8% of the overall population in Vojvodina province in 1910, as well as to terminate outdated and backward ownership and property relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dalmatia and in Southern Serbia (Kosovo and part of Macedonia) that belonged to the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Erić 1958). Since the majority of big landholders not only in Vojvodina, but also in Bosnia and Hercegovina and South Serbia were of non-Slav origin, one of the reform goals was 'Slav-ization' of the territories by internal colonisation of people from the Kingdom (Gaćeša 1995).

Within the First Agrarian Reform, the state determined the agrarian maximum for the big estates depending on the type of land, region and average big estate in the respective region. The agrarian maximum ranged from 87 to 521 cadastral acres (Lekić 2002, 104-117). All the land exceeding this particular maximum was allotted to the land fund, and the state had redeemed all land from its previous owners at market prices[3]. Peasants-beneficiaries were paying temporary lease for the land they got until the final liquidation of the reform that lasted from 1931 to 1941 when it stopped due to the Second World War. In this second phase of the reform, known as liquidation, peasant-beneficiaries were supposed to redeem the land from the state and become its owners. As for the beneficiaries of the agrarian reform, the following categories had priority: war veterans and army volunteers, colonists, landless people and poor domiciles.

According to Gaćeša (1995), this reform undoubtedly had a civil character, particularly because it eliminated remains of feudal ownership structure on the one side, and, on the other side, it enabled continuing capitalist production relationships in agriculture (238)[4]. This process changed the ownership structure in Vojvodina province, as well as in other parts of the Kingdom, except in Serbia and Montenegro, where free, private small and middle estates were dominant even before the reform. Due to the elimination of backward property relations, a significant number of peasants had become landowners by 1941 (while many of them were only leaseholders at the beginning of agrarian reform). Nevertheless, there were unsatisfied parties, especially among ethnic minorities, war veterans and army volunteers, who did not receive any land, or compensation, even though they had priority over other parties. That was the result of unfinished and inconsequent conduction of agrarian reform and tremendous political influence on the process itself.

Despite the fact that the rural population made 84% of the Kingdom at that time, politicians from the biggest Radical and Democratic Parties, the latter being less influential than former one, did not see in it reform, but partisan capacity (Isić 1995, 229-247). They had dealt only nominally with the problems of the peasantry, until they won the elections. The Radical Party, for instance, did not have any integral party program on the social and political aspects of the peasantry and its development. On the other hand, Democrats were using the peasants' voting capacity primarily to overthrow the Radical Party (Isić 1995, 232). Overall, both the Radicals and Democrats supported the interests of the bourgeoisie in rural and urban areas rather than those of the mainstream peasantry.

The mainstream peasantry were faced

3) At the beginning of the agrarian reform, the law from 1922 had anticipated that land would not be redeemed from the Habsburg dynasty, or from those who had gotten the estates as a reward from the Habsburg dynasty, or from the Turks and all others who had enlarged their estates due to the plunder or illegal conversion of the peasants' land. But due to different political influences that came particularly from the biggest Radical Party, which was almost continuously in power between 1919 and 1941, a large number of these big estates were redeemed by the state. That is how numerous previous owners became incredibly rich in a very short time (Lekic 2002, 117-139).

4) Many controversies surrounded the reform itself. To mention only a few: a selective conduction and interpretation of the law on Agrarian Reform by state bureaucrats (Milošević 2008), and often political misuses and bribery which, as a goal, had to increase the maximum for certain big estates (Lekić 2002).

with extremely low productivity due to outdated tools used in land cultivation, the lack of modern machinery and technology competences, education, health and other services, the lack of infrastructure and so on. Because of this, a large number of peasants were deep in bank debts and could not redeem the land they had obtained thanks to the agrarian reform. The interest of the peasants was advocated mostly by parties which were less influential. Interestingly, parties such as the Coalition of Agricultural Workers, the Yugoslav Republican Party or the Peasant Party which were trying to penetrate the dominant political scene, were closer to the real needs of peasants and were more aware of what their reality really looked like (Isić 1995, 238). However, after the Second World War, peasants entered into new stage of their professional transformation inspired by the communist visions of agriculture.

The Second Agrarian Reform began under the slogan 'The land belongs to its cultivators'. The targets of land expropriation became the large estates of banks, churches and monasteries, companies, as well as the big landlords' estates that were spared, or partially embraced, by the First Agrarian Reform. The expropriated estates of previous owners were not compensated. One of the priorities of the new communist government was to establish state and collective agricultural cooperatives with compulsory membership by 1953 (Gaćeša 1984). Since cooperatives had very bad economic performance, poor work organisation, faced great resistance from the peasants and other side-problems such as massive thefts of cooperative goods and livestock, and misuse of position within the cooperative hierarchy (Tošić 1959; Halpern 1963), the conclusion was that such state of affairs was no longer sustainable. The Law on the Agrarian Land Fund of Common People's Property (Zakon o poljoprivrednom fondu opštenarodne imovine) was passed in 1953. The law represented a new stage of the collectivization of property and the politics that further encouraged indirect subsidies to state farms, limitation of peasant holdings and imposing high taxes on private farming (Halpern 1963, 162). This kind of agricultural regulation lasted until the 1991 restitution of agricultural land.

The law introduced the agrarian maximum for private land up to 10 ha for agricultural workers, and up to 5 ha for workers. All expropriated land was allotted to collective cooperatives without any compensation, while membership in cooperatives became voluntary. Alongside this change, the emergence and strengthening of 'mixed' worker-agricultural households (that were active partly in agriculture and partly in industry) had become prevalent.

The peasant-worker living on his holding and commuting to a job outside his village is an important component of the Yugoslav labour force. According to a special agricultural census in 1960, it is estimated that there were some 1,306,000 peasant-workers in a total labour force of 2,985,000 (Halpern 1972, 80).

Until the restitution of agricultural land in 1991 – that has not yet been completed[5], three forms of agricultural production organisation and ownership had dominated in Serbian villages: individual / private, state and collective.

After 1991, state strategies in agriculture were oriented primarily towards privatization of state-owned enterprises and collective cooperatives, which would become an imperative of the new democratic governments in later years, i.e. after 2000. One of the goals of the Ministry of Agriculture since 2001 has been the abolishment of 'mixed' worker-agricultural households, professionalization, privatization and modernization of agricultural sector. Such policies resulted in the increased number of registered agricultural producers and changed ownership structure to some degree. According to the statistical data gathered in 2009, 67% of land was in private ownership, 30% in state ownership, 2% in collective, and other types of ownership made only 1% (RS Ministarstvo

5) The 1991 Republic Law acknowledged rights and restituted land to private claimants whose land passed into collective ownership according to the Law on the agricultural fund (1953), or by means of confiscation due to unfulfilled duties towards obligatory redemption of agricultural goods from 1947 to 1953 („Sl. glasnik RS" br.18/91). This meant taking away from collective ownership and giving land back to its former private owners regardless of their occupation (Čurović 1998, 3-8). The state had started to restitute only agricultural land, but the process was suspended in 1992 due to financial sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro imposed by the United Nations. During this short period, approximately 150,000 ha were given back to the real owners, but the process has not yet been completed.

poljoprivrede 2009, 13). Nevertheless, the current state in agriculture is far from being an example of order and law. Nowadays, the agricultural sector binds different political, private and state interests in common machinery to exploit resources, with informal practices and non-transparent contracts as an inevitable way of doing business, which, overall, represents a serious obstacle in furthering agricultural progress.

Local Setting

The village of Gaj belongs to the Kovin municipality and is located in the South Banat district, within the Vojvodina province. Gaj lies on flat and fertile soil with the Danube River flowing along the south edge of the village (about 7 km). Gaj is strategically very well located between four cities: Kovin, Bela Crkva, Smederevo and Pancevo. It is a highly multicultural community with Serbs forming the majority, and Czechs, Romanians, Hungarians and Roma as minorities. With a population of almost 3.000, this village is among the most populated ones in the area.

The village of Gaj experienced the same transformations as every other village in Serbia through the whole 20th century. In the eve of the first agrarian reform, the cadastre area of Gaj had approximately 1230 ha. Ploughs made approximately 454 ha, i.e. 36,6% of total surface (Pavković 2009, 260). Even though there is no exact data on how much land was distributed to peasants, Pavković (2009) provides very insightful social background of the period from 1919 to 1941 in Gaj. Apart from the lack of agricultural machinery and advanced knowledge in cultivating the land, many people coped with very high state taxes and credit debts since they could not redeem the land they got. There were cases when peasants were using bank credits aimed for land ransom for celebrations, weddings or building houses instead (Pavković 2009, 261-262). The village also mirrored the micro-political scene of the state where representatives of Radical Party were the most influential and dominant political factor on the local level, and, occasionally, these were representatives of the Democratic Party. Others, such as the representatives of the Social Democrats and Communist Party of Yugoslavia were significantly less influential (Pavkovic 2009, 259).

The socialist period brought about, up to some extent, the diversified professional orientation of the villagers. Apart from those who were mere agricultural producers, a part of the village population was employed in state companies and industries or the public sector, predominantly in Kovin and Smederevo, while Pancevo was a medical and educational centre. State vineyards nearby Bela Crkva were attractive for seasonal workers and wage labourers.

After the collapse of state agricultural cooperatives and forced collectivisation, the state began to found agricultural holdings in so-called collective ownership. This is how the Collective Agricultural Good 7th July was founded in 1955. This company possessed 1200 ha in collective ownership, out of which 2 / 3 of the land was expropriated land in the name of the agrarian maximum of 10 ha within the Second agrarian reform, and 1 / 3 consisted of village pastures converted into ploughs (Pavkovic 2009, 293). The company peaked at the beginning of the 1990s when around 150 people were employed – predominantly from Gaj.

7th July became private in 1993 due to ownership transformation. Privatisation in Serbia from the beginning of the 1990s and particularly from 2000 onwards, resulted in massive shut downs of mentioned companies or their resale through auctions. Many people from Gaj lost their jobs during this time. 7th July, for instance, was bought by a local businessman, but, since 2010, it has been going through the insolvency process. Many believe the owner`s reason behind the purchase of the company was not its improvement, but rather a significant amount of land which is in the company`s possession until the end of the restitution process.

On the other hand, the 1990s brought

about Kovin Mine, a new company, to Gaj. The company was founded in 1995, only 7 km away from Gaj. The mine exploits lignite beneath the water surface, which is a rare mining technique, as well as a distinctive feature of the village of Gaj. The mine has been operating profitably ever since and, even though it has undergone several changes in ownership, they have not affected its positive balance and success. Today, the mine, as well as very few successful companies in nearby cities, has created a strong competitive atmosphere for every potential job, but also the terrain for political corruption and clientele relationships.

A great part of the local population, whether unemployed, or employed in state or private companies, cultivates their private or rented land. According to many informants, even small pieces of land cannot be left uncultivated. In the socialist period, those who belonged to mixed worker-agricultural households would focus primarily on land and agriculture during the harvest season, and later on their second occupation (Pavkovic 2009, 340-377). One can suppose that the reason for this was the additional income from the land, but also the strong social stigma in the local community related to uncultivated land[6].

The average amount of cultivated land, whether private or rented, per household ranges between 5 ha and up to 20 ha, which usually depends on the number of people living in one household, age structure, and additional professional occupations of the family members. Among those who do not possess any land (or possess very little) are mainly professionals such as doctors, vets, lawyers, professors, teachers, and Roma in a large percentage. For 30% of inhabitants, agriculture is the only occupation, 10% are employed in construction and other industries, 6% are employed in the trade sector (predominantly private one), while 4.5% are employed in the public and state sector[7]. Besides these categories, pensioners and so-called 'gastarbeiter' (people temporarily or permanently employed abroad) have an important impact on the local economy.

For professional agricultural producers, meeting modern demands such as up-to-date mechanisation and technological competences is inevitable. Competition represents one of their driving forces, but also one of their biggest worries. Strong competition over potential free land is increasing sale prices, but also the amount of annual land rent. According to many informants, at present, some 20 people from the village stand out from the others in the sense that they cultivate more than 100 ha. They dictate the prices, but they often represent political factors in local council, or they are either leaders or members of local agricultural associations. The strongest agricultural producers often support the ruling political party, whether on municipality or republic level. Isić (1995) emphasized one characteristic of Serbian peasantry from 1918 to 1925 which seems to be applicable to current agricultural producers. According to him, conservative in nature, the peasantry rather opted for parties in power, believing that this way they would be spared the arbitrariness and abuses of local bureaucrats. Peasantry never opted for the party program, but rather for the authority, personal connections and influences, as well for the economic power of the local and republic candidate, hoping to benefit from it when the time came (Isić 1995, 240). Much of this presents the common way of understanding politics and the way things function towards the state and vice versa. The political clientele, therefore, seems an inevitable ingredient of success on the local level.

The close proximity of Gaj to several urban centres made the outflow of people to be much less than in other parts of Serbia. Existence of private land plots, which enabled people to cultivate the land or to rent it out during socialism, was probably the determinant factor in keeping people attached to the village despite their other professional occupations. Today, due to the generally unfavourable economic conditions and high unemployment in the country (20,8%), agriculture and land might, at least, be additional sources of income, if not the main means of

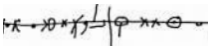
6) Only one of my informants resigned in the second half of the 1990s from a state company because he could not commit to agriculture, while many others have never considered leaving the job. Even today, many work additional jobs to agriculture, such as painting, repairing of car, agricultural machinery, electronics etc.

7) For more information on local population, see: http://www.selogaj.rs/?page_id=103

work. Apart from this, Gaj faces typical problems of Serbian villages such as high mortality rate, aging, outflow of youth, negative population growth and increasing number of single persons (man=402, women=253)[8].

The locals' everyday life is very much centred on 12 different agricultural, cultural, sport and artistic associations, which demonstrates their very developed sense of belonging, and awareness of political and social participation. The infrastructure is relatively solid due to the fact that it is one of the principal commitments of almost all representatives within the local council of Gaj. Very often it may be heard that Gaj represents an avant-garde village in comparison to other nearby villages due to its very developed political, social, cultural, economic activities and infrastructure.

With all its facets, the village of Gaj is representative of the topic of this paper, that is, the transformation of agriculture after 2000. Later in the text, special attention will be devoted to everyday strategies used by the people from Gaj who predominately work in agriculture. Their strategies point to their understanding and adaptation to transformations in agriculture and, particularly, to different state politics.



Lost in Modernization

Many studies on peasantry have often emphasized general ideological or political perceptions of peasants as backward, conservative, traditional, incapable of self-organization and of focused political activity. The rural-urban dichotomies based on differences in quality and lifestyle between urban and rural areas, provisions of state, market and health services, infrastructure problems etc., made rural areas become subordinated to the urban centres (see Leonard and Kaneff 2002; Ellis 1988). However, the notions of subordination and rural-urban dichotomy are the common tread in all classical theories of the peasantry, while 'peasantry itself is presented as the antonym of progress' (Leonard and Kaneff 2002, 7).

In their study on rural sociology of advanced societies, Buttel and Newby (1980) summarize the theoretical problems the discipline has had since its beginnings. One theory from the 1930s that had dominated the discipline for many generations was on the rural-urban continuum and originally came from Sorokin and Zimmerman (1929). This theory influenced the anthropological approach to peasantry (Redfieled 1947, Kroeber 1948). The idea of the rural-urban continuum is based rather on generalizations on urban and rural societies that were inherited from classical political economic theories. It emphasizes specific characteristics of both societies such as occupational, cultural and social, which, overall, were not obstacles for their parallel survival and development. Such perceptions of peasantry were often benevolent and sentimental and had nurtured an image of life which was lost in urban areas long time ago. The main problem with this approach was the recognition of the "specific" culture of peasant societies, that 'they are a law unto themselves and cannot be accounted for, as are other social groups', demanding, therefore, special sociology for rural people (Buttel and Newby 1980, 7). Nevertheless, the step forward was made when the limitations of the rural-urban continuum approach were revealed and when it was subjected to questioning (Lewis 1953).

In the 1960s, the rural-urban continuum approach slowly lost its impact. More and more scholars began to problematize the conditioning of space with specific types of social, economic and cultural behaviour (Buttel and Newby 1980, 7-10). They believed that 'distinctive' features of rural and urban society actually exist in both societies equally, meaning that space does not necessarily determine social, cultural and economic behaviour. 'Any attempt to tie patterns of social relationships to specific geographical milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise' (Buttel and Newby 1980, 8).

Despite different attempts in the academia to deconstruct the image of the peas-

8) For more information on local population, see: http://www.selogaj.rs/?page_id=103

antry, the perception that there is an essential peasant nature, most likely because of the still very strong influence of socialist and classical economic political theories that have created such image (Leonard and Kaneff 2002, 26), is generally still present.

Peasants became part of communist ideology in a very particular way. Since Marxism was the first total ideology with definite vision of the world, the place of peasants was determined by their backwardness. Marxism and, later on communism, advocated the transition of peasants into industrial workers. The final result was supposed to be the abolishment of their private property, intensified state industrialization and collectivization of agricultural production. One of the aims was also to liberate peasants from their 'chains', i.e. land, subsistence production and strong family and kinship relationships. Liberation also implied increasing awareness of political activism, participation and organization of peasants. On the other hand, classical economics was very critical towards traditional reliance of peasants on subsistence production and small and middle-sized land plots, believing that, under such conditions, profit maximization and achieving economy of scale is almost impossible.

Even though there is causality up to some extent between space and social, cultural and economic behaviour, the main problem with the notion of peasantry today does not rely in its particularities based on the urban – rural dichotomy, but rather in the politicization and instrumentalization of the notion of peasantry that is limited to several typified or desirable images[9]. Bearing in mind the predominately negative association that comes along with the notion of peasantry, in the changed post-2000 political context, one of the aims of the official Serbian agricultural agenda is to get rid of the category of peasants in favour of rural modernisation and progress, embodied in the new term – farmers. We will now see why this process was highly problematic for parties, the state and agricultural producers.

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Transition in many East European countries brought on new discourses on modernity and progress based mainly on liberal democratic values and free market (see Hann 1997; Leonard and Kaneff 2002). The same occurred in Serbia. As mentioned before, some of the goals of the new democratic governments and the Ministry of Agriculture were modernization of outdated concepts of 'mixed' worker-agriculture households, privatization of state enterprises and collective cooperatives, large investments into irrigation systems, rural infrastructure, updating agricultural mechanization by providing state-subsidized loans, and subsidizing agricultural production[10]. Even a slight look at different development policies and Strategy for Agriculture Development (2014 - 2024) of the Ministry that have been published since 2001, reveals they are very suggestive of the Ministry and the state as important actors who are going to 'fund', 'help', 'stimulate' or 'subsidize' different agricultural sectors. Within these policies, the state is presented as a benevolent partner of the agricultural producers rather than as a tax collector, thus aiming to humanize the perception of the state. One of the obvious purposes was building the new image of the relationship between the state and agricultural producers that are no longer on opposite sides, as it was often the case in different stages of socialism.

The term that describes the new level of cooperation is "partnership" between the state and agricultural producers. In the spirit of the new democratic politics, rhetoric and growing political correctness, the term peasant was slowly replaced in public speeches and addressing by the new term farmer. There are several reasons for this. First, the term peasant has very strong negative connotations, as we have seen in the previous pages. Bearing in mind that "partnership" implies mutual equal respect and cooperation between two parties, the term does not apply anymore, since it usually refers to the social and economic inferiority and subordination. Secondly, the term peasant with

9) The image of peasants in Serbia is strongly embedded in both national history and politics. They had often been used in different political campaigns throughout the entire 20th century (see Naumovic 1995). Nevertheless, on the global level, peasants represented revolutionary and army forces, and, contrary to their subordination to urban centers, i.e. to the state, they were its main driving force. It is understandable, therefore, why different ideologies wanted to tie up the desirable image of the peasant to their vertical value.

10) For more information, see: http://www.mpt.gov.rs/articles/list_titles/14/1/agrarna-politika-i-ruralni-razvoj.html?menu_id=55

all its connotations can hardly be associated with the modernisation discourse. The term farmer had become more suitable instead[11]. The state, i.e. the Ministry of Agriculture, has taken over the role to intensify education and to organize courses, workshops, conferences and seminars aimed at improving knowledge, skills and economic performance, and to assist the smooth transition of peasants towards professional farmers.

On the other hand, agricultural producers have had representatives in the National Peasant Party in the parliament since 2012. The party was founded in 1990 and, until 2012, has had significant ideological and inner-party transformations, from social democracy to far-right[12]. Agricultural producers have been organizing themselves mainly since 2005 / 2006 within different sorts of agricultural associations, and have participated to some degree in deliberating and drafting of agricultural laws.

Looking from the outside, everything seems to be ideal. However, the main problem lies in the fact that the whole new agricultural ambient seems transformed only on the surface. The real causes of such state are deeper and go back to the 1990s when the process of privatization started. The party in power (the Socialist Party of Serbia – SPS) at the time was building its own structure of interests, based on the "economy of favours", both financial and logistical. Many of the former managers of successful socialist enterprises, politicians, parts of intelligence and criminal clans, joined in one common goal: to support the regime in power, i.e. the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Ever since, cartelized economy has started to develop, while former socialist agricultural enterprises, state and collective land, were among the first interest spheres where new business class of so-called tycoons started to dominate. This state of affairs has continued after democratic changes in 2000, while these structures have become stronger, more complex and sometimes even absolute (cf. Ledeneva 1999). Instead of the post-socialist "retreat" of the state, the process that emerged could be defined as "privatization of the state" or "emergence of the private state" (Hibou 2004). Ruling elites, either state bureaucrats or political representatives, private actors, tycoons, foreign middlemen and other parts of the hierarchy of 'private state', actually use the space that used to belong to the state, (it is not anymore or it is a semi-state due to inefficient law regulations or non-existing laws). That is the space where the whole machinery of different actors, based on non-transparent, semi-private or private contracts and favours, emerges. In one word, that is the space that is being privatized.

The agricultural producers feel their interests are being neglected and subordinated to those of the ruling elites. A large number of informants and representatives of local agricultural associations from the village of Gaj usually complain about the low protection state provisions, the lawless state in the agricultural sector, the uncontrolled operation of tycoons regarding privatisation and lease of state land and so on. Interestingly, among agricultural producers themselves, there is one predominant belief that those who run agricultural associations want to become the part of the "system" and to profit from different acquaintances by supporting the party in power. That is indicative of local or republic elections, particularly in the period of campaigns. The last local elections in 2013 in Kovin municipality were particularly important for agricultural associations, simply because they should have indicated and anticipated the results of republic elections. Judging according to campaigns, the local elections were taken very seriously. Many campaigns were not often in accordance with democratic standards. Bribing and electoral indoctrination of potential voters seemed to be most successful among Roma and agricultural producers[13]. Their voting capacity was very important, if not decisive, on the local level because it might have contributed to the perpetuation of the "system" in the sense Ledeneva is using it (1999).

Such a situation creates actual political isolation of one part of agricultural popula-

11) The term "farmer" in the Serbian language has strong semantic connotations and is associated with big professionalized, private independent agricultural holdings like those that exist in the U.S.A.

12) In 2012 this party was in coalition with the Serbian Progressive Party that won elections and formed the government.

13) Many informants said that campaigners were bribing people in accordance with their social status. Roma and pensioners, for instance, were getting packages containing meat, sugar, oil and other food supplies, or they got free ophthalmological and cardio check-ups. Indoctrination of agricultural producers was more subtle. It was often accompanied with gifts in shape of a small bag consisting of a cup with the candidate's face on it, his program and a pencil. Campaigners were secretly leaving those bags in front of the doors of agricultural producers.

tion that does not have proper representatives, neither within agricultural associations, nor within political parties. Therefore, agricultural producers often feel they are left on their own which, actually, fosters their perception of semi-independency on one side, and encourages them to rationalize some of their manipulative acts on the other, which will be later analysed in more detail.

Further on, ambitiously-conceived agricultural policies since 2001 were supposed to imply a high level of responsibility and professionalism on both sides, institutions and their representatives, and agricultural producers. But the current situation in the agricultural sector is very contradictory. The most common example is the imposition of standards and new rules of doing business in agriculture without actual laws that would support and protect parties, institutions and agricultural producers.[14] In an institutional sense, there is no predictability which is conditio sine qua non for their successful functioning. That is how a paradox of empty modernization and progress emerges, where that which needs to be changed remains almost intact, while improvements are either individual (spontaneous or intended) achievements, or are side-results of a "system"-based machinery. In other words, those who are part of the "system" may enjoy the fruits of advocated modernization and progress.

As a consequence, agricultural producers who remain outside the process do benefit from it in the sense that they do not have to perceive responsibility towards the state and its institutions as highly obligatory. In such moments, the old label of peasant has its applicable value. The label peasant, burdened with a lot of negative meaning, in semantic connotation does not comprise the idea of professionalism and business responsibility as the label farmer does. That is probably due to the decade-long neglect by the state, and, more importantly, their even longer status of "special", "autonomous", "conservative" and "traditional" parts of society. Leonard and Kaneff summarized the identity shift in peasants in the sense that they have become 'highly skilled in manipulating the peasant label for their own purposes. Rural inhabitants apply the term to themselves when it suits them and distance themselves from it when they feel it is not appropriate' (Leonard and Kaneff 2002, 34).

Specific political, economic and identity adaptations to the current state are particularly obvious in the agricultural producers' daily routine and business. Therefore, in the following pages, everyday strategies which reflect the essence of above-described tensions between agricultural producers and the state will be presented and analysed.

The "Partnership": the Upper Level of Cooperation

Taking the risk of expressing very strong statements, it seems that the "partnership" between the state and agricultural producers is very much based on manipulative strategies from both sides. On the part of the state, it is the matter of uncontrolled machinery of the "system" which cannot be turned off easily, while on the side of agricultural producers, it is the matter of minimizing the risk and coping with uncertainty. Here are presented a few of the most common examples of everyday manipulative strategies applied by agricultural producers from Gaj. They are also chosen because they illustrate the weaknesses of the state in controlling and coping with the corruption and misuses of different sorts. These examples, on the other hand, can be interpreted as agricultural producers' expressions of resistance to the current state of agriculture, to the local and republic bureaucrats and, more generally, to the "system". However, the main reason for their manipulative strategies is access to different resources (whether state or market), or maximization of existing resources.

The most common type of manipulative strategies among agricultural producers appears in the sphere of agricultural state-

14) The most recent case is very illustrative. The state advocates different sorts of economic associations (and among others, agricultural), but the law on associations and cooperatives has not yet passed the parliament procedure because of re-drafting and editing since 2005. This law would define the terms, rights and obligations of parties that want to enter the association.

subsidies and market access. The subsidies are aimed at agricultural producers who cultivate between 0.5 ha and 99 ha. But, in reality, people who also use these subsidies actually cultivate more than 100 ha. They usually transfer a half or more of their property to their family members, who are also registered as agricultural producers, or, only nominally, as a separate agricultural household at a different address, but, actually, all family members within the same household benefit from the subsidies.

On the other hand, agricultural producers who cultivate a far less amount of land usually employ other strategies regarding the subsidies. At the end of a year, agricultural producers often seek recourse for oil, fertilizers and seeds. The Ministry of Agriculture accepts only oil bills from one favoured oil company that is more expensive than its competition. In such a context, people developed their own mechanisms for acquiring oil bills from that company and also "the black market of oil bills", which functions according to the trade rules of demand and supply. Moreover, they buy much cheaper smuggled oil for agricultural mechanisation on the black market.

In the context of access to the market, for ordinary agricultural producers, buying cheaper seeds and fertilizers, as well as selling their products directly on the market, i.e. beyond private agricultural cooperatives that are mediators between the producers and the market, is not possible. Theoretically, they can sell their products directly to the stock market, but they need to meet many demanding criteria such as large quantities, special conditions for storing and keeping crops which almost no one can fulfil. Under such circumstances, many producers do not have any other option than to sell their products to a local cooperative for a lesser price than elsewhere. Because of this, many producers develop their own illegal channels of buyers to whom they sell their crops for a higher price. When they sell a significant amount of crops, they do not make legal money transfers through their bank account in order to avoid enrolling into the tax payment system. Instead, agricultural producers find a third confidential person who appears as the nominal seller and whose bank account is used for the respective money transfer.

However, the following example, even though not connected to manipulative strategies of agricultural producers, actually summarizes the most common problem. That is the issue of tycoons in almost all bigger villages of Vojvodina and their tremendous influence on politics. This was one of the main reasons for the foundation of the Association of Agricultural Producers from Gaj. The triggering event was when the owner of the agricultural company 7th July got the state land on lease from Kovin (approximately 1600 ha), that belonged to the village cadastral unit, without any public tenders and competition. Moreover, the monthly rent for the state land was far less than the commercial price. The agricultural producers within this Association organised themselves and protested against this decision in front of the city hall in Kovin in 2012. They informed the Ministry of Agriculture about this abuse, arranged media broadcasting and publicly and openly addressed the issue. Likewise, apart from combating monopoly, the reason of the Association was to create more transparent access to state land in accordance with commercial conditions, as well as to enable dispersion of the market and political participation on the local level. Even though the epilogue of this action remains to be seen, this Association tried to engage and to bring everyday problems in agriculture to a higher level.

This example and other examples of manipulative strategies of the agricultural producers of Gaj, as it has already been indicated, rather depict coping with market uncertainties and minimizing business risks, than tendentious frauds. Their acts are based on the rational and dynamic planning of their lives in the long and short term, by using the means at hand in a society which is unpredictable and burdened with serious economic and social problems.

According to Milles and Blossfeld, people living under conditions of uncertainty often use a dynamic, rational choice model in order to 'find the best action that fits their given beliefs and desires, to develop the most appropriate belief given the evidence at hand, and to collect the correct amount of evidence' (Milles and Blossfeld 2005, 16).

Applied to agricultural producers who use manipulative strategies, one common argument might explain their actions. Almost every day, they face unstable market conditions, high inflation, strict regulations for access to the market, monopolization of prices and the market itself, frequent changes in agricultural policies, raising standards for doing business in agriculture often without proper laws, politicization of export-import products, favouritism of different sorts and so on. In fact, agricultural producers compensate for their professional dissatisfaction by manipulating subsidies, by operating in the black market; by keeping open all formal and informal means of access to different resources and, finally, by protesting. Interestingly, many of the interviewed producers agreed that they do not need subsidies to improve their agricultural production, but only predictable market conditions, rules and prices. Nevertheless, subsidies actually substitute losses and uncertainties in their business, so all those who do not have the official right to apply for subsidies by these means want to protect themselves and their investments in agriculture. On the other hand, agricultural producers who manipulate subsidies, or who, at the same time, deal with formal and informal markets, rationalize their strategies with believes that entire Serbian agriculture is "on their backs", so the pressure is huge, in addition to the considerable harvesting risks. Unlike other professions, in a number of cases, they do not have any alternatives to agriculture, because they were educated and trained only for agriculture. Their success or failure is directly linked to their means of production, i.e. the land, which, therefore, requires the calculation of risks much in advance.

15) Conditionally speaking, distinctions between the "neglectful" state and the "uncontrolled" agricultural producers, and the "patronising" state and the "demanding" agricultural producers, appeared as my personal conclusion from the fieldwork experience and as the general impression from over 70 in-depth interviews.

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It seems that the "partnership" between agricultural producers and the state is currently coloured by the latter's distrust. This is particularly evident in the situation of the so-called 'neglectful' state"[15] when the state does not have the institutional capacities to monitor, or to provide certain institutional and business ambient to agricultural producers, while, on the other hand, this situation favours the ruling elites of the "system". Consequently, such state of affairs creates an environment for uncontrolled operations of agricultural producers who, by disobeying existing regulations, express their protest, resistance and professional dissatisfaction.

The other side of the "partnership" between the state and agricultural producers is also very contradictory in itself. Namely, they understand what the market is and how it functions, particularly on the basis of demand and supply. Since 2001, the state's role in agriculture has been, apart from providing services (financial, infrastructure, institutional, educational), that of building the image of the trustworthy party agricultural producers can rely on. In other words, to patronize agriculture. Even though one of adopted principles in official agricultural agendas was, nominally, free market exchange, the reality has proven the contrary. Very soon it was clear that there was a monopolized market, with the high influence of politics on the exchange of goods, with favoured export and import companies. Realizing that there is no free competition, agricultural producers have demanded protection and guarantees in the sense that the state should provide fixed prices and regular purchase of their agricultural products. This has created a paradox, because agricultural producers act according to free market rules in informal spheres (illegal markets), while they demand more regulations in formal economic sphere.

The "partnership" between the state and agricultural producers is, actually, the litmus paper of a dysfunctional system where agricultural policies serve only to

meet the standards on the surface, while, in fact, promises of transformations and modernization have remained mostly in the sphere of political marketing. And, instead of integrating agricultural producers in the process, paradoxically, the process itself is moving away from them, as they do not have enough political power to influence the change.

Conclusion

Throughout the entire 20th century, the agricultural sector in Serbia represented a political issue and an ideological project. In the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes the first agrarian reform was aimed at enabling ownership of land for landless people and at strengthening capitalist production relationships in agriculture. The second agrarian reform in socialist Yugoslavia was aimed at limiting private ownership of land and at strengthening collective and state-controlled production relationships in agriculture. Post-socialist agricultural transformation after 2001 has brought ideas of professionalization of agricultural producers, elimination of state agricultural enterprises and collective cooperatives, free market economy based on free competition and, predominantly, on private ownership. In the later phase of agricultural transformation, one of the aims of development policies was creating an environment where the partnership between agricultural producers and the state would be recognised as the common interest of both parties. Such cooperation was supposed to result in placing Serbia on the regional or even European map of most competitive exporters of agricultural goods. The actual outcomes of this partnership turned out to be failed promises and hopes of the progress of Serbian agriculture. Whether because of the weaknesses of the state in controlling power and dominance of the ruling elites and their interests, or the lack of institutional capacities, willingness and know-how blueprints, agricultural producers have not benefited significantly from having the state as their partner, or from supposedly liberated economic conditions.

Serbian agriculture, under the domination of monopoles and cartelised economy, has not achieved its goal. It did not become one of the largest agricultural exporters in the region, or in the European Union. But more importantly, as an everlasting ideological project, even in the 21st century, agricultural producers still search for their own professional and social identity expression. So, for the time being, they are neither here, nor there, neither peasants, nor farmers.

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